

# Significant Writing in Egypt

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*By Elaine Diamondidis and Manal Shaheen*

In the summer of 1995 I was one of nineteen Egyptian teachers who went to the United States as part of a summer program sponsored by the Binational Fulbright Commission of Egypt. We took courses at Georgia State University and observed, assisted, and taught at a local secondary summer school.

While I learned a lot about teaching, I was most impressed by the sight of bulletin boards with a lot of small notes. They seemed to chase me in the school, university, and even in the dormitory:

(Figure) The idea of being able to communicate easily on paper amazed me. American teachers and students think and talk on paper. Egyptians do most of this by talking. We rarely write. We don't like to. What I mean here is significant and enjoyable writing. I want to write more, and I want my students to write more.

The most significant regular writing teachers do is in their required daily preparation note books. Everyday we write the same thing: date, class, aims of lesson, revision, presentation, etc. Yet we rarely look at them again. We keep our writing safe and sound for the inspectors to come and check the spelling and that's about it.

Likewise, most students' writing focuses on grammar, spelling, and structure and not on meaning, significance, and pleasure. Writing "correct" sentences makes students forget what they are writing about. Because English is a second language, mistakes happen all the time. I am always saying, "It's a very good piece of writing but..." Of course "but" here is so depressing for the students, yet I am obliged to correct them.

Given all of this, I had to find a way to get them and myself to spend more time writing. I want them to think, talk, and create on paper. I want them to write what they think about and about how they feel and act. Also, I want writing to be a habit for me and my students. Habitual writing will influence the style of the students in the long run since most of our examinations are, ironically, written.

I asked myself how I could write and make my students write meaningfully and regularly. During my summer in the States, I was asked by Dr. Gail Nelson of Georgia State University to write what she called "journals." Journals were the answer. Journals meant writing about anything inside and outside the classroom: comments, personal reaction to texts, personal experience, important events. Teachers don't correct them. They just make sure the students write.

Journals are perfect for many reasons. They require students to express personal attitudes and reactions which they don't usually do in our curriculum. I do not have to correct them, a double blessing for me and the students. I do not have to worry about a load of papers from a typical

class of 45-50 students. The students feel comfortable writing without me looking over their shoulder. I must confess I find myself fighting my urge to correct.

On the first day of school I asked students to get a small notebook for their journals. I explained what journals were and asked them to write about anything they wanted; additionally, I gave them an option. I started slowly with a modified plan because I knew it wasn't easy for most of the students to write freely if they did not have specific topics. So, I helped them by giving some general ideas. Still, some students could not write about general topics without having guide words or start-up ideas. The first general option I used was: Write about a place you want to visit.

Some wrote about countries like France, the U.S.A., and Greece. Other students wrote about places inside Egypt like the Pyramids, Luxor, and Aswan. Some imaginative students wanted to visit the moon, Mars, or Tiba, the capital of ancient Egypt.

At first they were reluctant, but when I asked selected students to read their writing aloud in the class the next day, they were very enthusiastic. Reading aloud was a reward. For the first time they could write about and discuss their feelings and thoughts. I wanted to let all of them read, but we were limited by time.

The next step was writing their response to certain quotations from some plays. For example, I gave them a small quotation from *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness.

I didn't specify what I wanted exactly. I just asked for their response. Some summarized and explained what they understood. Other students wrote what they felt or remembered when they read this quotation. One I liked the best was from 14-year old Eman. She wrote, "I think these words explain what I feel now. Sometimes I feel very happy like a bird and maybe after some short time I feel like if I am in a prison I can't even breath. Maybe I believe in something or someone and defend it very hard but after sometimes I may forget all about it."

Another scene was the three witches' prophecy in Macbeth. Mohamed wrote, "Macbeth would have done what he had done even if he didn't listen to the witches' prophecies. These prophecies rang a bell for his ambitions. One of them came true after a little while and that was a green light for him to go for the rest of them."

Both Eman and Mohamed expressed what they understood and expressed it very beautifully. Though they used simple sentences with some mistakes, they not only understood, they used the language with flair and imagination. What they wrote was significant for them, and for me.

To use Mohamed's phrase, journals are a green light for me and my students to go on with writing enjoyable, expressive writing without fear.

Working with the students for a year on journals gave me a lot of new ideas and gave me a push to work on journals next year also. I thought that I should give the students more choices to write about, so those who find free writing difficult can have some hints.

Jack Marlowe, one of the many American teachers with whom I have worked on this article and as part of this exchange project, suggested that we can choose topics that subtly reflect the students' problems. For example, I can suggest writing about their examination grades. Or let them write about something personal they wouldn't like to talk about to anyone except their paper and pen, like being treated badly by someone or impressed or depressed by something. Writing here would be a kind of relief for them. I try to set a good example and write in my journal while they are writing. I also read some of my work to the class.

Journals achieved most of my goals. I write on my own all of the time. I write much more than I wrote before. This article would not be possible without the confidence I gained with my journal writing. My students write what they want to say, not what is correct. They are getting the habit of writing. Their writing and my writing is gaining and will continue to gain significance.

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